

Farmers, Seminole Tribe Take Excess Water from Lake Toho Drawdown

Unprecedented action lessens impacts on Lake Okeechobee and estuaries

“We’ll take it!”

Thanks to the tremendous response this past December by the agricultural community and Seminole Tribe of Florida, the District has the opportunity to potentially divert and store up to 100,000 acre-feet of Lake Tohopekaliga (Toho) environmental drawdown water on private and state-owned land. That’s more than double the amount needed to compensate for the water that would eventually reach Lake Okeechobee as a result of the much-needed drawdown.

“Out of concern for Lake Okeechobee as well as the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, our Governing Board asked us to look into alternative storage sites to solve the dilemma of managing South Florida lakes, rivers, canals and estuaries without negatively impacting others,” said Executive Director Henry Dean.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

“The agricultural community and Seminole Tribe enthusiastically and voluntarily stepped up to the plate by offering to store the excess water on their private lands. I commend them for sharing the responsibility of managing our water resources and offering a workable solution,” Dean said.

The drawdown of Central Florida’s Lake Toho from about 55 feet to 49 feet – postponed twice since 2001 – is crucial for avoiding any additional environmental degradation to the lake. The physical removal of organic muck and nuisance vegetation will significantly improve fish and wildlife habitat. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission plans to remove 6.7 million cubic yards of muck from 43 miles of exposed shoreline.

The gradual drawdown officially began Nov. 10, 2003, when the District received approval from the lake’s regulator, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The drawdown is expected to reach its lowest point in mid-February. In fact, work is already ahead of schedule in positioning heavy equipment and prepping for the muck removal activity.

46,000 ACRE-FEET ALREADY DIVERTED

The voluntary overture by the farmers and tribe to store the water on their land significantly reduces potential impacts on Lake Okeechobee and the coastal estuaries. The action also reduces the possibility that the drawdown and habitat enhancement project would be discontinued due to high levels in Lake Okeechobee.

The volume of water associated specifically with the Lake Toho environmental drawdown is equivalent to an increase in Lake Okeechobee water levels of about 1.2 inches, or approximately 45,000 acre-feet. By late January, approximately 46,000 acre-feet of water had already been diverted from Lake Okeechobee. The District has identified potential opportunities to store over double that amount – up to 100,000 acre-feet – on private and/or state-owned lands, which is equal to nearly one-quarter foot of water level on Lake Okeechobee.

LANDOWNERS ACCEPT RISKS

The agricultural community has designated areas to take the lion’s share of the water, including agribusinesses such as Lykes Ranch, Alico Farms Corp., Hilliard Brothers, U.S. Sugar Corp. and others in south-western areas surrounding Lake Okeechobee. The Seminole Brighton and Big Cypress Indian Reservations are also taking a significant volume of the water. Water is being moved with the aid of temporary pumps onto the private lands.

In addition, the District moved and stored excess water on state-owned lands such as the Holey Land and Rotenberger Wildlife Management Areas, and stormwater treatment areas south of Lake Okeechobee.

“The landowners will see no or little benefit from this action, except for their willingness to help,” Dean said. Most of the water will be stored in stormwater retention ponds or spread out over the land, and will either evaporate or filter down into the ground to recharge the aquifer. And the landowners are not without risk due to unforeseen weather conditions.

“The farmers’ willingness to accept these risks for the benefit of the environment and the people of Central and South Florida is truly commendable,” said Governing Board Member Harkley Thornton. “Storing excess water on private lands is unprecedented, and our thanks goes out to them for their generous gift.”

While this cooperative, short-term fix allows the Lake Toho drawdown to continue, the long-term fix is implementing more permanent solutions to regional water storage problems. The South Florida Water Management District is actively working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin the process of modifying the current operating schedule for Lake Okeechobee. In addition, the agency is expediting the construction of three large permanent reservoirs around Lake Okeechobee under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

As the lake bottom becomes exposed in response to the drawdown, heavy equipment will begin the task of removing 6.7 million cubic yards of organic muck and nuisance vegetation. This action will result in improved habitat for fish and wildlife.



What the heck is an acre-foot?

An acre-foot is the volume of water that would cover 1 acre of land (43,560 square feet) to a depth of 1 foot, equivalent to 325,851 gallons of water. An acre-foot is the basic measure of water volume used by water managers. You would need 1 acre-foot of water to fill approximately 22 above-ground swimming pools*.

*20-feet-round-by-4-feet deep

District supports Urban League of Palm Beach County

As a co-title sponsor for the 30th Anniversary Equal Opportunity Day Awards Dinner of the Urban League of Palm Beach County, the South Florida Water Management District recognizes the value of partnering with community organizations to ensure equal opportunities.

“Like the Urban League, we recognize the importance of involving and engaging the community in our endeavors,” Governing Board Vice Chair Pamela Brooks-Thomas told the audience of nearly 400 community and business leaders at the December event in Palm Beach Gardens.

District sponsorship funding will be used toward Urban League of Palm Beach County initiatives such as student internship and mentoring programs through the National Urban League Incentive to Excel and Succeed Program – or NULITES.



Pamela Brooks-Thomas, Governing Board Vice Chair